

The Lankavatara Sutra II
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This weekend we're going to be working with a very old sutra and a modern haiku poet. I'll say why those two are keeping company with us this weekend.

The sutra is the *Lankavatara Sutra*, and if you haven't heard of it, don't worry—most people haven't anymore. It was a sutra written in Sanskrit that came into China, and Bodhidharma, who's the first ancestor of Chan in China, handed down to his dharma heirs, and they handed down to theirs for a few generations. It's considered challenging, difficult, and a bit obscure in places. Because it was such a dense and radical teaching, it worked really well in the beginning of Chan, when small groups of people got together and could chew on it together. As Chan became more popular, they had to look for sutras that were easier to convey to large groups of people without this chance to really chew on it together.

It's gone into relative obscurity, at least in the West, but the scholar and translator Red Pine has published a new translation of the *Lankavatara Sutra* that I recommend for anybody's who's crazy enough to read it. Red Pine is a person I appreciate and admire tremendously. He's done a beautiful, very clear translation with lots of helpful notes. To honor the re-emergence of the sutra into the world, we're going to take a look at it.

The radical nature of the teaching was certainly, for that time and place, something quite different, but as I've been re-reading it in Red Pine's translation, I've been thinking how it speaks to so many of our contemporary concerns in a very contemporary way. Here are the basic ideas of the sutra.

The idea begins with 'Everything in the world is mind'—and *your* mind in particular. But it's not saying that you create your own reality. It's saying that, in our natural state, in our natural condition, our heart-minds are continuous with the world. It's not a matter of subject and object, or observer and observed. It's *one thing*, and

that's our natural state and way of experiencing things. But we throw projections into the world, and then we think the projections are real. So what we're really having a relationship with is our projections and not with the world as it is. There is a quality here, a natural state, of the identity or the unity of heart-mind and world, which gets distorted by projections we lob into the world, and our taking these projections for truth.

The sutra says there's a way to drop those projections, to let them fall away and not arise anymore so that we can be in that natural state where we see the unity of our interior experience of the heart-mind and our exterior experience of the world.

The last thing the sutra says, which was at the time quite radical, is that we have to experience for ourselves this state of projectionlessness — which is tranquility, which is awakening. It's not enough to philosophically understand it or think about it; we must experience projectionlessness and the open space that opens up. The sutra talks about ways to go about doing that, but it's such a big thing, such a large movement of the heart-mind, that the sutra takes into account that you're not going to be able to this by next Wednesday. This is an ongoing, long process.

I'm interested in how we take an understanding like this and integrate it into our lives as they are. If we don't jump immediately into the state of perfect projectionlessness, what would it be like to move more towards it? What would it be like to allow some of the projections to fall, then more of the projections to fall, and come into this truer perception of things? How would we do that in our actual lives?

That made me think of the Haiku poet Issa, because his meditation practice was based on the *Lanka* teachings, and he took up poetry as his practice toward enlightenment. He thought that the writing of poetry was a possible path to awakening. So we have not only someone whose practice is suffused by these teachings of the *Lankavatara*, but who is also living a life and turning it into something — in his case, poetry.

When he decided that he was committing his life to making poetry as a path to awakening, he changed his name to Issa the Beggar. Issa means One Cup of Tea, which is quite a beautiful name.

He was a poet of beautiful melancholy, matching our own time when there seems to be a lot of difficulty amongst us. He had, by any measure, a tremendously sorrowful life, full of the deaths at a young age of people he loved, including four of his children in infancy, and his mother when he himself was a child; his wife died and his house burnt to the ground. He was in a lawsuit where someone tried to keep his inheritance from him, and he lived in dire poverty all of that time. So he had a life of great struggle, and in that struggle he was trying to get as close as he could to what was actually happening, and to express that. Not surprisingly, part of what happened for him in that life he was living was a deep sense of loneliness.

This is the kind of poetry he wrote. This is a bit that carries a profound sense of the loneliness he must have felt. It's haiku :

Loneliness already
planted with each seed in
morning glory beds

Even in something as beautiful and life-affirming as planting morning glory seeds, there is already loneliness at the root, at the seed before the root.

Some of Issa's poems have become koans for us and are part of our curriculum now. Here are some quotes from the *Lanka* that aren't strictly koans, but there's so much to inform the koan way I thought we could have a good conversation about them, and then take them into Issa's poems. The one quote from the *Lanka* which *is* a koan for us is the first one : "Things are not as they appear, nor are they otherwise." Great! Things are not as they appear, nor are they otherwise.

As a bit of an elaboration on that, here's another quote from the sutra with a dialogue between Mahamati and the Buddha. These questions and answers are a common form in the sutras. Mahamati said to the Buddha, "In the light of your wisdom and compassion, the world neither is nor isn't." Red Pine, the translator, clarifies the meaning of this, and makes a point that I think is important. He says, "In light of the Buddha's wisdom, the world doesn't exist. In the light of the Buddha's compassion, it doesn't *not* exist."

This next one is something that I hope conveys the great contemporary quality of the sutra. It mentions the five forms of consciousness, which are the five sensory consciousnesses — sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

The mind is a hero in a play,
the will is the hero's confidant.
the five forms of consciousness are the cast,
projections are the audience.

Isn't that great? I love 'The will is the hero's confidant'. *You know what we should do? I have an idea!* And that mysterious 'Projections are the audience'. Let that rattle around and see what happens.

So in the state of projection : 'Assertions and denials don't exist where there is only mind.' When we're aware of this unity of interior and exterior, or the heart-mind and the world, assertions and denials have no place. But they're a great feature of the state of projection.

This, too, feels quite contemporary : 'Once a position is established, a multitude of truths appear.' That is interesting to me because it's so much a given in our contemporary ways of being together and our contemporary discourse that you have your truth and I have my truth, and we're just going to trade our truths, or share them. We each have a story or viewpoint and it's really important that they all be heard and acknowledged. I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that. But then it is interesting to have this other perspective on it : once a position is established — once *any* position is established — a multitude of truths appear. Suddenly the possibility of all these various positions come into being, and it becomes a matter of a multitude of truths. On the other hand, 'one who sees nothing but the heart-mind, nothing but this unity, cannot be touched by words'. I think that means that words can't substitute for the experience of that unity; once you've experienced that non-projection state, you can't really be talked out of it. You can't really be persuaded by a position.

‘As long as the mind keeps turning, these paths never end. When the mind finally ceases, there is no path or one who walks it. The path that isn’t made, this is my one path.’

Finally, there is a kind of benediction at the end : ‘Those who abandon these are thereby free of projections. Buddhas come from every land with hands beyond conception and touch their heads as one, and lead them into suchness.’ There’s something there about swapping projections for buddhas, which doesn’t seem like a bad trade to me; and what are the buddhas from every land? That’s everything, right? It’s all buddhas from every land, so it’s as though, when we’re free of projections, everything in the world, with hands beyond conception—with hands beyond any kind of rational understanding—touch our heads as one and lead us into suchness.

Those are the quotes from the *Lankavatara Sutra* we’ll take a look at. Are there any questions at the level of meaning such as, I just don’t get what these words mean? Not at the deeper sense of where it’s pointing.

Q1 : Suchness?

JS : Suchness is *tathagata*, and we’ll talk some more about that tomorrow, but suchness is when we can recognize the exact, complete nature of each thing, free of any kind of filter or opinion or judgment, so that I look at Piper and I just see Piper. The universe is filled with her just as she is. That’s *tathagata*, that’s suchness.

Q2 : Is that the same thing we call *essence* in Western thought?

JS : I wouldn’t presume to answer that. I don’t know. I think it might be a bigger thing than essence, but I’m not sure. It’s not like the ‘truest thing’ of Piper, it’s the Piperness of Piper. But maybe that’s essence, I don’t know. Would that describe essence—the Piperness of Piper?

Q3 : The Piperness of Piper is essence. That's then different from the concept of the thing in itself.

JS : Can you say how?

Q3 : Because essence, the Piperness of Piper, is almost a concept, an idea of Piper, to extract a Piperness of Piper. But the thing in itself is, I think, more existing in the world without what you would call projections.

JS : So, I would have thought of those two things as the same, that if I'm truly experiencing the Piperness of Piper, I'm not experiencing my idea of her, but I'm experiencing her as she is. I think from this perspective, from the perspective of the *Lanka* and the koans, that's what that means.

Q4 : It's the truth. The dog.

JS : Yes, the true fact of the dog. Okay, any other meaning questions?

Q5 : Where it says 'those who abandon these', is that referring to the projections?

JS : It refers to a big, long thing. I questioned whether I was going to qualify this, but then I thought, just think of it as everything else that's been talked about so far; that you abandon all that stuff about projection.

A poem by Issa at first seemed to me to be something about a mood we can have about the world as a whole:

A melancholy autumn wind
blows through the world :
the pampas grass waves
as we drift to the moor,

drift to the sea.

Then, moving from that melancholy sense of the world, there's a very particular experience of suffering :

Memories and thoughts of love pain my breast;

Poetry and prose all forgotten, not a word left.

There is a path the enlightenment but I've lost heart for it.

Today, I'm still drowning in samsara.

One of the things that's so interesting to me about this is that he's right : there's no poetry in this at all. It's the barest, clunkiest language, which is such a perfect evocation of the state he's describing. There isn't room for a metaphor. There isn't room for a bit of poetry.

The next he wrote on losing his traveling companion:

At sunset this autumn

evening, I wrote on a wall :

'Gone on ahead'

These are various conditions of loss and sorrow that he describes so well. He could also describe happiness well. There's also a lot of projective quality in happiness as well as in difficult times.

In the cherry blossom's shade

there's no such thing

as a stranger.

And then, just a line from a poem by Theodore Roethke: "In a dark time the eye begins to see" ... What is it that it sees?

Then a very chewy koan:

One time when Dongshan was washing his bowls, he saw two crows fighting over a frog. A monastic who also saw this asked,

'Why does it come to that?'

Dongshan replied, 'It's only for your benefit, honored one.'

What does *that* mean?

Q8 : What does *Lankavatara* translate to?

JS : *Lanka* is as in Sri Lanka. It's the island, that place. *Vatara* is like avatar, an appearance there. So it's the sutra that was spoken during an appearance on Sri Lanka.

Q 10: But it was originally Sanskrit. So was that the language there in Sri Lanka? Or was it verbally transmitted and sort of held in Sanskrit before it was translated into Chinese?

JS : It wasn't literally spoken in Sri Lanka, but it was placed there dramatically. Like things were placed on Mount Gradrakuta and other places.

I'll just say a word about dreaming practice, and then it's time to go home and do it!

We've found that the more we walk this way together, the more we dream together, the more we appear in each other's dreams, the more we have dreams that are significant not just for ourselves but, during a gathering like this, possibly for the gathering as a whole. We bring the dreams in every morning—only if you wish to. If dream practice isn't familiar to you, the quick and dirty version of it is : as you're falling asleep, you can fall asleep with the intention to have a dream. You can ask for a dream. You can fall asleep intentionally thinking about one of these poems or koans or quotes, or about anything else you like. You can fall asleep with the intention to have a dream that helps you with a question you have. If you want to have the best chance of remembering your dreams in the morning, try not to wake up to an alarm clock. Don't startle yourself out of sleep. When you begin to realize that you are waking up, keep your eyes closed, don't move your body, just stay there for a few moments and see if you can catch hold of a dream or an image. If you can't get hold of a dream or even an image, see what you're feeling as you wake up, and if you can, follow the feeling back into a dream. Dreams respond to intention, so if you can intend to dream, often that

will happen. And write them down, if you can, right away. That helps to remember them.

In the Mahayana tradition, there are different kinds of dreams that happen at different parts of the night. The dreams of the early part of the night, up until midnight or a little bit after, are often thought of as karmic residue dreams. They're the dreams that seem to have a lot of content, and we try to figure out what it means or what it says about something in our lives.

In the early morning hours, near the hour of the wolf, we can be permeable to those unseen forces around us, and that can be a time of nightmare and it can also be a time of revelation, depending on who's talking to us.

Near dawn, as we work more and more on this way and with dreams, we might begin to have what are called dreams of natural clarity, where they have a quality of being given, as if we're receiving the dream. They can have profound meaning for ourselves, for our communities, for other people. We can dream for the people. We can dream for each other at that time. There's a sense of having received a teaching or an understanding with those dreams.

The last thought I'll plant is found in a lot of the Southeast Asian countries out of which these dreaming practices come : people talk about being seen by a dream. You don't *have* a dream; you're *seen by* a dream. Which is a very interesting way to think about dreams : oh, a dream saw me last night.

Q12 : That just brought to mind something that I saw three evenings ago. You may have seen the documentary *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* where Werner Herzog says, 'I needed to leave because it looked like they were looking at me.'

JS : He was filming inside of what is the oldest art so far found, 32,000 years ago. Incredible cave art. We don't know what the meaning was for them, but there's something so immediate that happens in our experience now with that art. So, there's the thread, the 32,000 year-long thread.

Q13 : If you wind up being someone who goes to bed after midnight, does that mean you don't have the opportunity to clear out the karmic bucket?

JS : These practices were all formulated a long time ago, before electricity, so my sense is that, probably, everything's just shifted up. So, the early part of your sleep, whenever that is, that's the karmic residue dreams.

Thank you very much.